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ABSTRACT

Prepared for parents of young children, this booklet provides information about the ways children learn in kindergarten, guidelines for judging the quality of kindergarten, and aids to understanding how kindergarten staff and classroom activities help children develop. Topics addressed include dramatic play, helping, pets, cooking, eating snacks in groups, physical exercise, reading, mathematics, group activities, work/play time, children with special needs, and parent involvement. (RH)

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FOR PARENTS:

An Introduction To Kindergarten

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Student Services Branch
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PREFACE

This booklet was prepared for you, the parent of a young child. It is intended to help you

— find out how children learn in kindergarten,

— know what to look for so that you can choose a good kindergarten, and

— understand what's going on in kindergarten when you visit.

TO THE PARENT

If you are the parent of someone who will soon be starting kindergarten, this booklet is for you.

It's a big step. Like the first word, the first step and the first loose tooth, starting kindergarten is a milestone. Your child may be eager and excited, perhaps a bit nervous too. What about you, how do you feel? Most of us feel ambivalent about each of the steps our children make toward growing up. Your ambivalence is probably healthy. It means that you can understand your child's uneven growth, so that you can applaud his efforts toward independence and responsibility while still providing the support and protection he needs from you.

What are your expectations of kindergarten? Perhaps your neighbour has told you that sending your child to kindergarten is a must for getting her ready for grade 1. But Grandfather may think it's nonsense. 'Why can't you just let her be a kid?' he wants to know.

The pictures here were taken in New Brunswick kindergartens. We hope they will give you an idea of what goes on in kindergarten and who will be there. The text will explain how these activities and people help your child develop. After all, that is the idea behind kindergarten; the 'children's garden' exists to support and enrich the children's natural development. Like a real garden, it should be a place of energy, interest, happiness and beauty.

DRAMATIC PLAY

Dramatic play is a beloved and important kindergarten activity. Young children do not keep their imagining inside as an adult does when he daydreams. Nor, when they don costumes and assume roles, are they putting on a performance. Kindergarteners learn by becoming. They play out what it is like to be a storekeeper or an astronaut or a secretary. This imaginative play helps them make sense of the busy adult world around them.

What is the teacher's role here? She supports the children by providing props, making suggestions, and by helping the child who is standing on the sidelines find a way to join the action. By watching and sometimes joining in their play, she can see how to use it to each child's advantage. She may decide, for example, that the children need more information about stores.

Perhaps she'll take them on a trip to the neighbourhood grocery store so that they can find out more details about how the storekeeper attracts customers, keeps track of stock, takes money and handles telephone orders — kindergarten research. Helping this child make a sign and that one construct a costume while pointing out to the typist the first letter of her name, the teacher enriches and extends the scope of their play.

HELPING

Helping themselves and others is something kindergarten children like to do because they love to feel competent and useful. What better way to practise tying shoes than helping out a friend? Washing tables, dishes or rubber dolls and putting away blocks can be very appealing tasks for five-year-olds. The wise teacher keeps them appealing by working

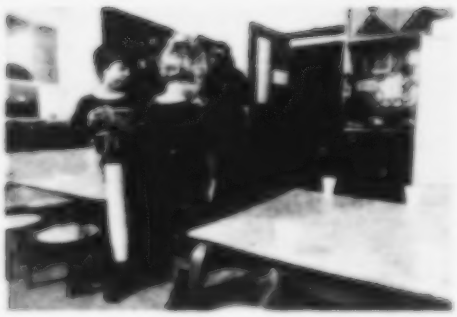
alongside children, thanking them for their help and giving them time to linger over the soap bubbles. She helps them see that planning and cleaning up afterwards are important parts of most jobs. Children like participating in all stages of a process. It helps them learn about time and sequence. Of course it helps them become responsible people too.

PETS

Caring for plants and animals is an important part of kindergarten. Young children need the experience of taking care of something small and dependent. They learn to be gentle. The teacher encourages them to talk about their pets, measure them, draw or paint pictures of them, find out their favourite foods and keep track of how much they eat and whose turn it is to feed them. For the alert teacher, everything that interests a child is a learning experience that can be extended.

COOKING

Food preparation is another popular kindergarten activity. When they cook, children can follow recipes, mix, measure and observe the changes caused by freezing or heating. These are all practical math, language and science experiences. Without making it a dull lesson, the teacher does use the cooking activity — and many others — to extend the children's understanding.



SNACK

Eating together is a social experience. In most kindergartens the children sit in small groups to encourage an easy flow of conversation. Setting the table, putting out one cup for each milk drinker and matching one napkin to each cup, children learn the real meaning of counting.

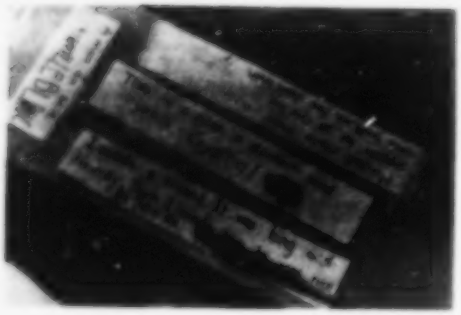
EXERCISE

Vigorous exercise is important for growing five-year-olds. They need time each day for running, climbing and jumping, a chance to stretch and breathe deeply. This is healthy for the body and good for the mind as well. When they climb or aim at targets, or build with crates and boards, children solve problems, develop an awareness of space and learn to work together.

READING

Many parents want to know whether reading is taught in kindergarten. The answer is that, while there is no formal instruction in reading or any other academic subject in a good kindergarten, some children do, in fact, learn to read. Many others will learn to recognize a few words meaningful to them. How does this happen? Informally, much as it occurs in a book-loving home. Please note: informal teaching is not haphazard. The specialized training of a good kindergarten teacher enables her to recognize meaningful opportunities to introduce reading and writing — and science, math and social studies concepts too. These opportunities arise from the children's activities and interests: making shopping lists for the store trip, writing notes to their parents or each other, dictating descriptions of their art work, writing labels for their block buildings, counting out, sorting out, labelling and sharing materials and supplies, keeping track of jobs, etc. In the dramatic play area, newspapers, shopping coupons and telephone books are part of the setting for house play; children's books are kept near the dolls' bed. Paper, markers, pencils, tape and scissors are always kept handy for making signs, menus, money, or whatever props the play suggests.

Thus, while your children won't bring home worksheets or workbooks and you won't find elaborate alphabet displays on the wall, you'll find plenty of written material: recipes, words to favourite songs or rhymes, dictated stories — material that is interesting and meaningful to the children. Of course, they won't all be able to read everything, but they are certainly learning how written language functions for communication.



Kindergarten teachers are well aware that their first responsibility is to develop children's oral language abilities through conversation, discussion and song, and by creating an environment that provides interesting things to talk about. But they know too that many fives are interested in the written language which is so conspicuous a part of the out-of-school environment, and they capitalize upon that interest in the ways described above.

One does not have to be a reader to appreciate books. The kindergarten room should house a good selection of children's books: stories, poems and reference books on a wide range of subjects important to children and teacher, such as animals, flowers, trucks, food and carpentry. The teacher reads almost daily to the entire group and often shares a book with a small group or a single child. Some teachers recruit volunteer readers, older children or parents, to help satisfy the five-year-olds' appetite for their favourite books. They also encourage children to browse through books on their own. This year's browser is likely to be next year's reader.

MATHEMATICS

Similarly, in the hands of a knowledgeable teacher, math is an integral part of the play-oriented curriculum. The teacher sets up interesting situations which give rise to interesting problems:

> How many cups will it take to fill this bottle?
>
> Which is heavier, the wet sand or the dry sand?

Looking for patterns on a nature walk, arranging building blocks on shelves by shape, sorting buttons, measuring the amaryllis plant each week: these are valuable mathematics experiences which the teacher plans. Just as important, she makes full use of the opportunities that arise spontaneously in play and conversation.

> You think he's got more raisins? How could you find out for sure?
>
> Your building is tall. Is it as tall as you are?
>
> I'm going to give her five more pushes and then it will be your turn. You count while I push.

GROUP ACTIVITIES

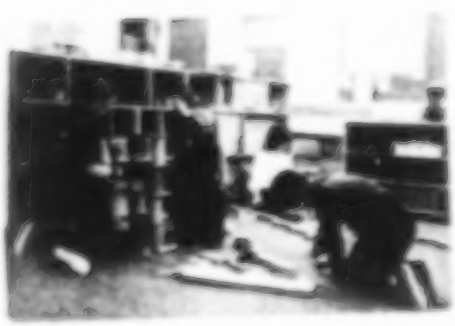
The teacher sometimes brings the whole group together to take part in activities like dancing, singing and finger plays, or to listen to stories or hold discussions on matters of general interest. Pleasant group times like these will help your child feel comfortable about talking and listening to others. Even children who feel very shy at first tend to lose their fears in a relaxed, supportive environment.

WORK/PLAY TIME

Much time in kindergarten is devoted to work/play time, otherwise known as 'choice time,' 'activity time,' 'free play' or 'work period.' Whatever its name, most kindergarten teachers consider it the most important part of the day because during this time children are engaged individually or in small groups on projects of their own choosing.

A range of possibilities is made available for all children, but each child makes the activity her own; each has a special way of working, favourite play things and art materials and preferred companions.

They may build with blocks, play house, try out musical instruments, make roads in the sand, weigh objects in the balance scales or engage in any one of a number of activities carefully selected and prepared by the teacher.



PARENTS ARE WELCOME

Work/play time is an ideal time to visit kindergarten. It is here that you can really see the program in action. What is more, your child will get an idea of what awaits him next year. You may become so interested that you will want to be a regular visitor to your child's kindergarten. As a visitor you might accompany the group on trips, read stories or share a special interest or hobby. Your involvement will enrich the kindergarten program, keep you informed and delight your child. You don't have to volunteer on a regular basis; an occasional visit from a busy parent is meaningful too.

ALL CHILDREN ARE WELCOME

In the past few years, a growing number of children with special needs have been attending kindergarten in integrated settings, to their own and other children's benefit. Preschool teachers and children seem to be especially welcoming and resourceful. Perhaps this is because the flexible, play-based curriculum of a good kindergarten is especially designed to accommodate children with a wide range of interests and abilities. Different children will require different kinds of supports and adaptations. Each case is different. All children are special.

CHILDREN LEARN

The teacher helps each child to become involved in projects that interest him deeply. By arousing his interest and nurturing involvement, she fuels his love of learning. Most children are intensely curious about the world — isn't your child? The gifted teacher — and all kindergarten teachers should be gifted — is the one who helps develop children's eagerness to look and touch into a hunger to understand. Children motivated from within have a powerful capacity to concentrate, persevere, and succeed.

CONCLUSION

We hope that we have spoken to some of your questions and concerns about kindergarten. It may be clearer now that both your neighbour and Grandfather *are* right, because the kind of kindergarten that allows children to be children, that encourages their curiosity and their active, hands-on learning style, is the one that best prepares them for the grades ahead.

Of course you and your child will have many specific questions about your kindergarten that are not answered here. Please share these questions and concerns with your child's kindergarten teacher. She is eager to get to know you.